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Women and Family in the Later Years: Findings from the 1990 General Social Survey

by

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ABSTRACT

Many aspects of aging pose particular challenges to women, not because of gender differences per se, but because of women's different life circumstances and positioning in society and family. Older women are more likely to be poor, in ill health, widowed, living alone and to experience institutionalization. In this paper, findings from the 1990 General Social Survey on family and friends (13,495 respondents) are reported which reveal that many popular beliefs about women and aging are more myth than reality.

Aging is a feminist issue, although not often seen this way. Women, on average live longer than men, live longer in disability or with chronic health problems, more often experience the deaths of spouse and friends, more often live alone in their later years, are significantly poorer than men of the same age, and more often institutionalized. Yet, the feminist challenges of aging, both individually and collectively, have yet to be fully explored.

Despite growing attention to aging in research and social policy, much more needs to be known about women's experiences with aging. The perspectives typically employed in the social sciences to study aging do not enable a clear understanding of how women's experiences as we age may be the consequence of our life circumstances, which differ substantially from those of men. The exception is the feminist perspective on women and aging which essentially holds that women's experiences with aging are determined by what women are expected to be and do socially. (Gee and Kimball, 1986: 9; McDaniel, 1989). In no arena are social prescriptions for women sharper than in family, and yet older women's experiences in and with family is the arena about which we know least.

Much of what is known about older women's experiences in and with family and friends is from qualitative or small scale studies (Kaden & McDaniel, 1988, for example). Until 1985, when the first General Social Survey was conducted, no Canada-wide data existed on the social aspects of aging, except for what little could be gleaned from the Census or public opinion surveys. The 1990 General Social Survey focusses specifically on family and friends, and includes a

representative sample of older Canadians, within a sample of all community-dwelling Canadians over age 15, enabling a glimpse of the experiences of older women in family context that can be generalized to all older Canadian women.

Context

There is a great deal of discussion about aging in Canada today, both in the popular press and in academic journals. Aging is an issue of policy significance too, given the number of times it crops up in political debates and policy papers. Several themes are recurrent in contemporary discussions: that population aging is a problem to be solved; that aging is an economic concern, largely because of the presumed dependency of older people on society in terms of pensions and health care; and that older women pose a particular problem because of our presumed double (both women and old) dependency. These themes recur not because they are based on fact, but rather because they somehow fit popular beliefs about the lower status of older people in general, and older women in particular. They also parallel many of our collective fears about economic and physical decline.

Canadian society is aging, with wide-ranging implications for the future. Population aging, largely the consequence of a birth rate decline (thus fewer young people entering the population), is occurring everywhere in the industrialized world. For families, this means that there are fewer and fewer middle-aged and younger people responsible for larger numbers of older relatives. We now spend more of our lifetimes caring for older relatives, directly or indirectly, than we do in raising children. The implications for families loom large.

Among the challenges is the support or care-giving crunch. Not surprisingly, given women's longer life expectancy and traditional caregiving roles in families, women provide the bulk of spousal care until their spouses die. Research reveals that women (largely daughters and daughters-in-law) provide most of the care to elderly relatives as well (Gee & Kimball, 1987; Kaden & McDaniel, 1990; McDaniel, 1988a; McDaniel, 1990; McKinnon & McDaniel, 1991). Men are more likely to provide indirect assistance, such as financial help, and tend only to be called on to do caregiving when no female alternative exists.

Women, according to previous studies, have been found increasingly to be in a crunch of generations requiring help. Women of middle age, for example, may have teen or young adult children who still need parenting. The now popular tendency to remain in the family home for longer periods, during schooling or the early years of work, means that mothers continue parental roles longer. Further, adult children tend now to return home to parents after divorce, unemployment, or other life difficulty. At the same time, middle-aged women may have growing responsibilities for their aging parents, parents-in-law, aunts, uncles, and even grandparents. Women in this situation are called, "The Sandwich Generation," for obvious reasons.

Caught in this network of familial demands, middle-aged women may not have time, energy or inclination to plan for their own older years, to continue to work outside the home, or even to look after their own health and well-being. This means that the challenges faced now by middle-aged women may follow them into their older years.

Data

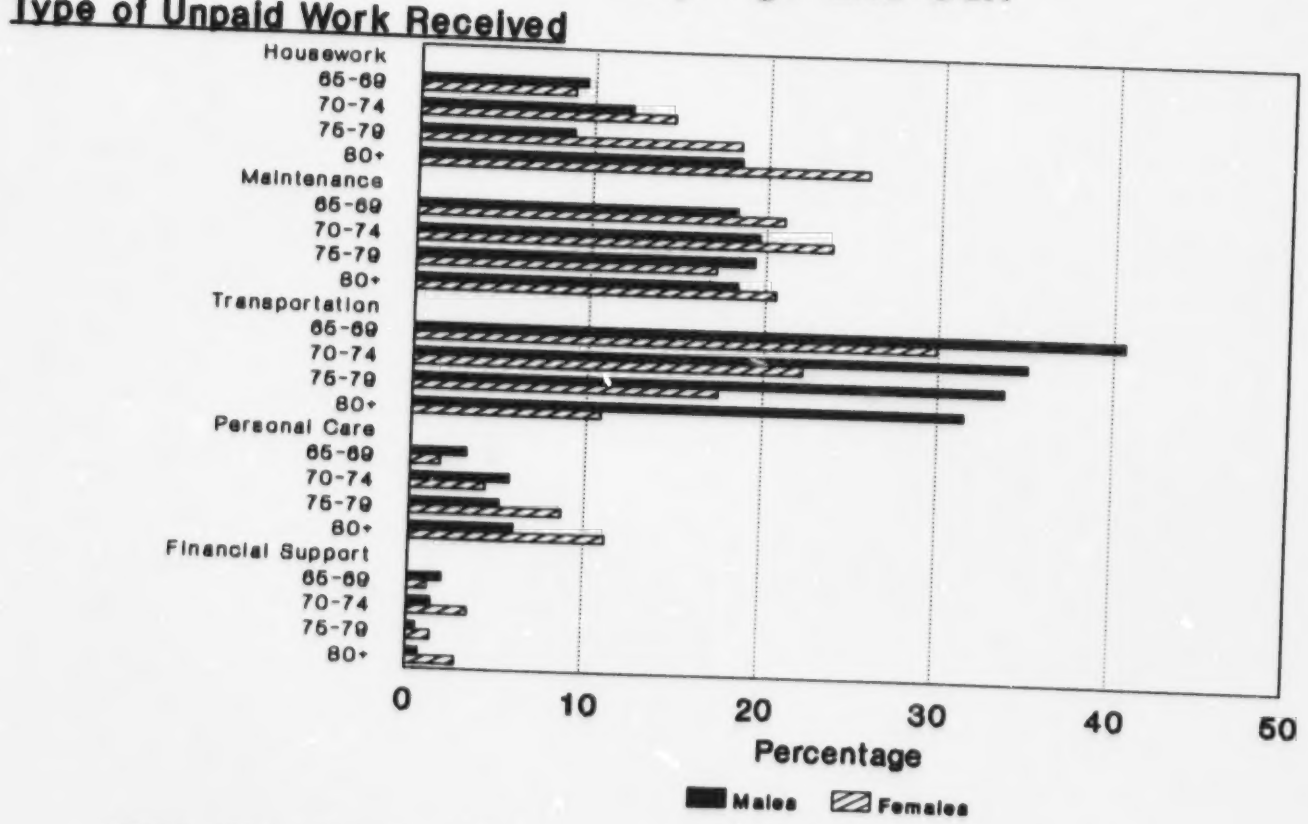
Data analysed here are from the General Social Survey, Cycle 5 (GSS-5) on Family and Friends, with a sample size of 13,495 Canadians. Data were collected by interviews conducted in January through March 1990 (Statistics Canada, 1991: 2-3). The stratified random sample includes 3,196 non-institutionalized people 65 years and older, with 56.9% of these women. GSS-5 focusses on relationships in families, and among friends, household help and supports, satisfaction with family and friends, and background socio-economic data (see Statistics Canada, 1991 for further details). The General Social Survey series, initiated in 1985, is intended to gather data on Canadian social trends and to provide information on policy issues, so although some of the same questions are asked each year (to different samples), the focus of each survey is different. The 1990 GSS-5 is the first national survey of family and friends, representative of the Canadian population, and thus provides a rich glimpse into the lives and relationships of Canadians.

In this paper, questions of interest include unpaid work done for respondents, and their sources of emotional support when in need. To provide the context in which to interpret the findings, limited analyses are included of income and of satisfaction by age and sex. All analyses included here rely on data weighted to be representative of the Canadian population.

Findings

The first and overwhelming finding from analysis of GSS-5 is that older Canadians, both men and women, receive little unpaid help from outside their households, except with transporation. This is contrary to popular belief about the dependency of elders. Evidence

Figure 1
Unpaid Work Received by Respondent (From Outside Household) 65 years+ By Age and Sex



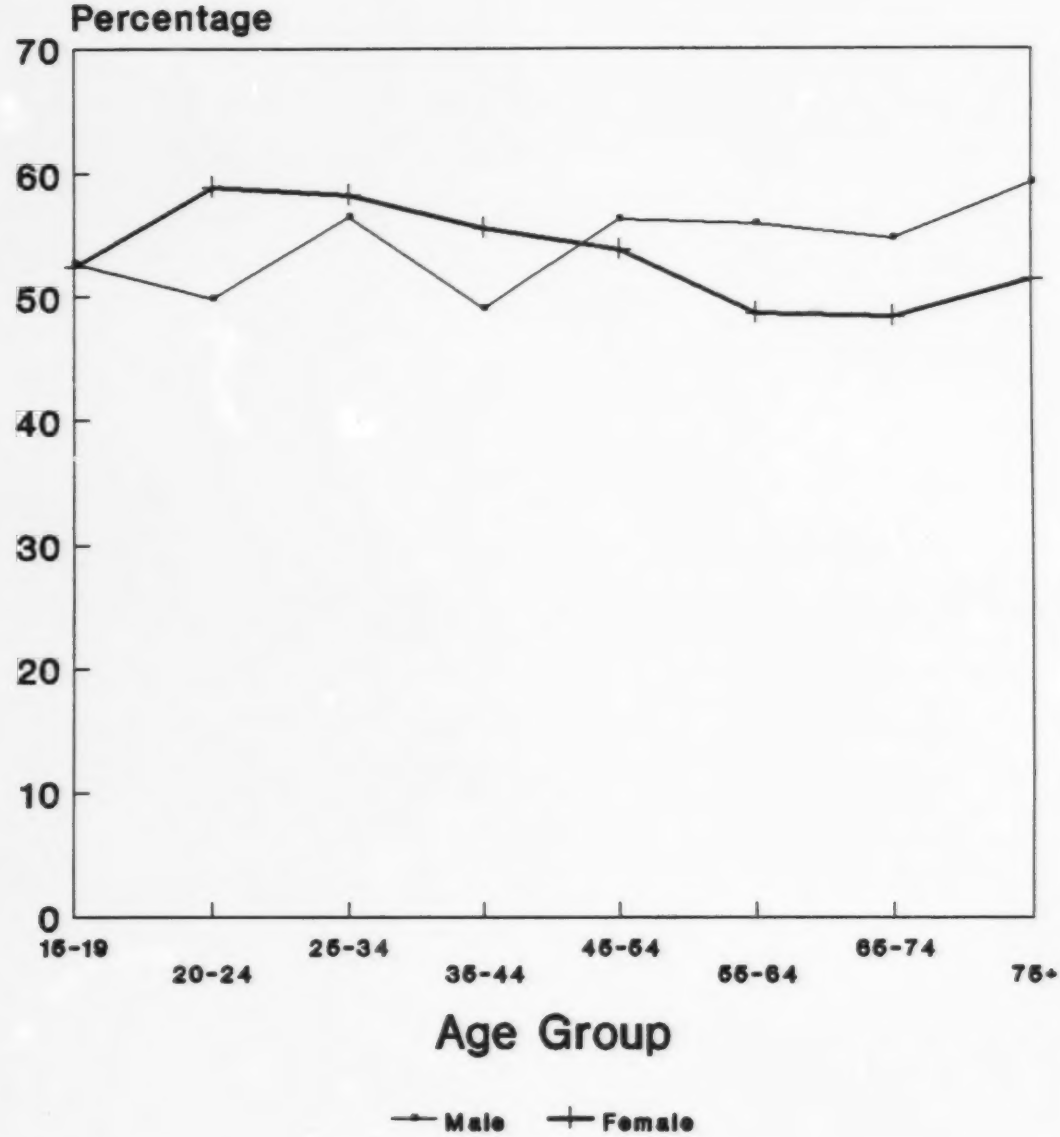
GSS-5, 1990: Family & Friends

from analyses not shown here reveal that those 65 years and older receive little paid help either. Women report receiving slightly more unpaid help than men, except with transportation, as shown in Figure 1. The greater help that women receive, particularly in the 80+ category with housework and personal care is likely due to women's greater longevity, and to women's greater probability of disability in later years. That women receive slightly more financial support than men after age 70 is likely a function as well of women's longer lives, and lesser access to pensions. The decline in unpaid help to women over 74 with home maintenance may be that women of this age, who are disproportionately widows, tend to move into apartments or other facilities requiring less maintenance.

That older women tend to be so self-sufficient is remarkable in light of their socio-economic circumstances. Among women 65+, 79% have incomes less than $15,000 a year, while only 7.8% have incomes of $25,000 or more. For men, the comparable figures are 47% and 28.1% -- quite a difference! Close to half of those 65+ report health-related activity limitations, with more women reporting limitations than men, particularly in the older age groups. Yet, a majority of older Canadians see themselves as being very happy, as shown in Figure 2. Significantly, more women are happy up until the late 40's and early 50's, at which time, more men report being very happy.

Despite their circumstances, a significant minority of older Canadians, both men and women, manage to help others. In analyses not reproduced here, it is found that a significant minority of men at all ages after 65 help others, mainly with transportation, but also with home maintenance and finances. Women tend to help most with personal care but also with transportation and housework. The myth

Figure 2
Self-Reported "Very Happy" by Age and Sex



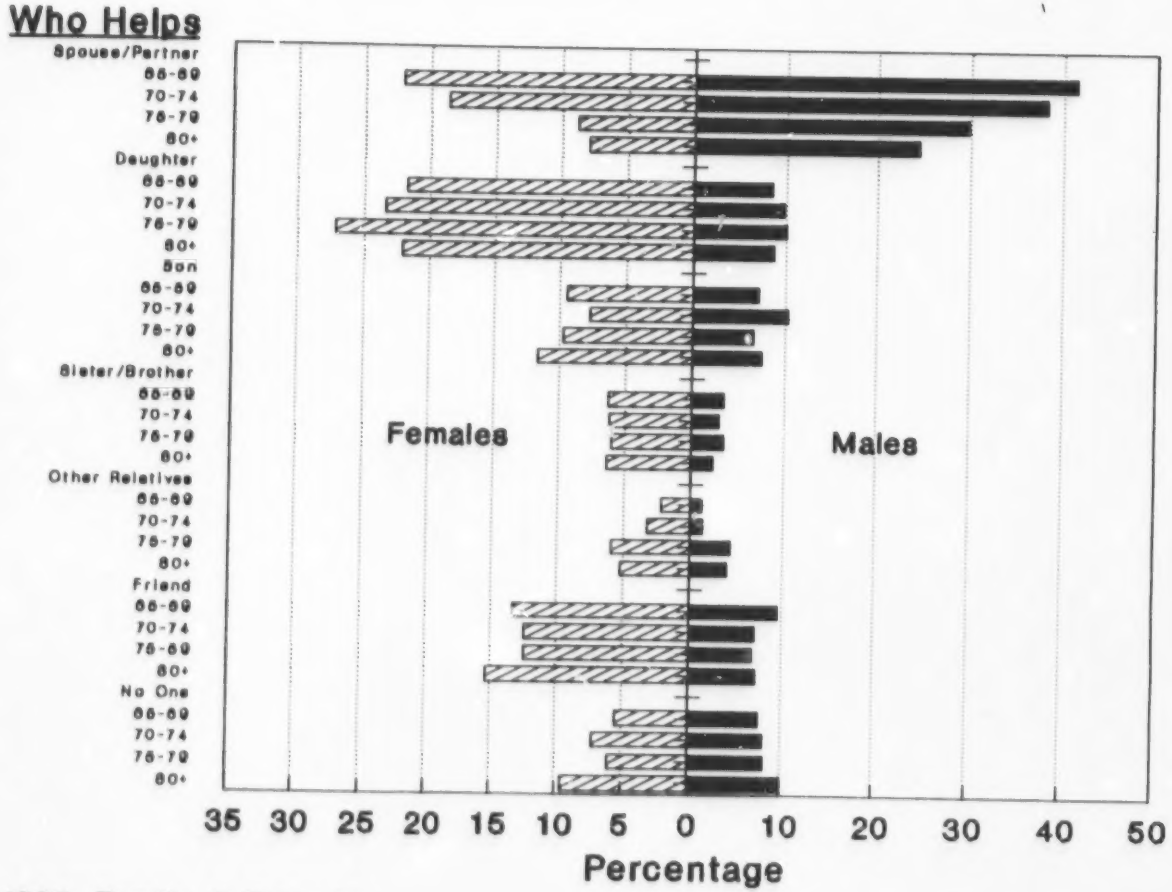
GSS-5, 1990: Family & Friends

of the older dependent person is laid to rest with these findings. Like the woman c. 80 who told her 60 year old daughter that she couldn't come to live with her because the "old people" needed her to help them, the reality of older women's lives, as revealed in this 1990 survey is far different than many popular myths would have us believe.

Two questions on emotional supports, asked in the 1990 survey, are particularly relevant here: who helps first when depressed, and who helps first when respondent is upset with partner. Gender differences here are large and important, as shown in Figure 3. With respect to the first question, men reveal their overwhelming dependence on spouses for emotional support. Women rely most on daughters, next on spouses, and then on friends. This pattern of emotional supports may be the result, in part, of availability as much as preference. Women, who are more often predeceased by their spouses, may turn to daughters and friends more because they have no spouse. The sharp decline in reliance of women on spouses with age suggests some support for this. However, women's reliance on daughters, friends, sons, and siblings is greater than men's at all ages after 65, and does not sharply increase with age. There is, for both sexes, a strikingly high response of "no one" to this question.

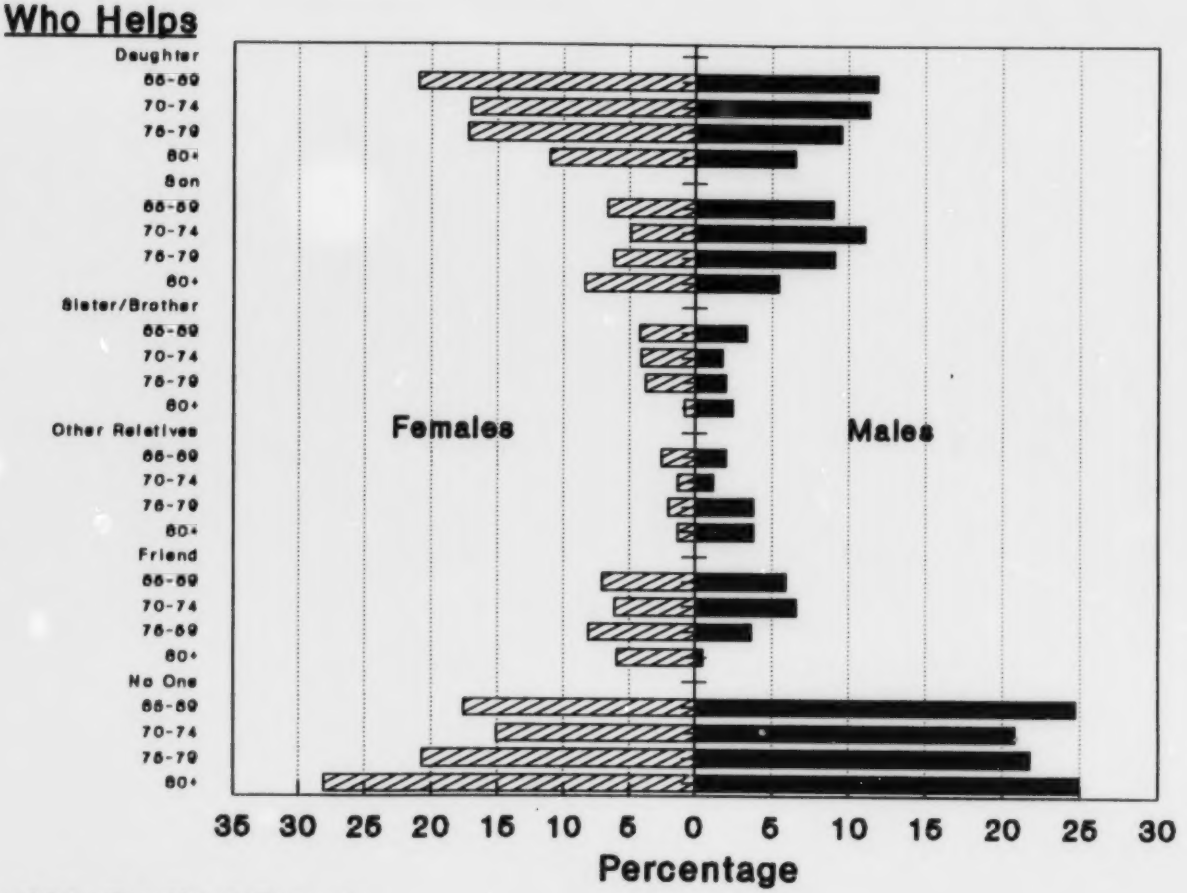
When spouses are not an option, up to 25% of men in the various age groups reporting they would have "no one" to turn to when upset with spouse, as shown in Figure 3. While the "no one" response is high for women too, it is less high than for men, except among women 80+. Women report turning to daughters and friends to a greater degree than men, who also turn to daughters a bit more than to sons.

Figure 3
Who Helps First When Respondent Feels Depressed by Age and Sex, 65 years+



GSS-5, 1990: Family & Friends

Figure 4
When Respondent is Upset with Partner Who Helps First
By Age and Sex, 65 years+



GSS-5, 1990: Family & Friends

The picture that emerges here is of older women embedded in more caring relations in older years than men, despite greater impoverishment and disability. Men heavily rely on spouses to the neglect of other relationships.

Conclusion

What emerges from this brief analysis of GSS-5 data is that older women, despite significantly greater impoverishment than men, as well as greater disability, and greater likelihood of having experienced the disruption and trauma of the death of a spouse, are more likely than men to be self-reliant, and to maintain social supports. Older women are also more likely to have a network of people on whom they can rely for support, whereas men rely much more heavily on spouses alone. The striking theme emerging from this analysis is the degree to which women are relied upon by **both** women and men for emotional support.

The potential policy implications of this analysis are many. Although older women, and men too, tend to be immensely self-reliant, it is clear that that self-reliance is contingent on significant supports, and no doubt sacrifices, by middle-aged women relatives who assist in numerous ways. Without that support, substantially more older women would respond that they have "no one" to turn to for help. It is heartbreaking to find that so many men in particular, but also women, report that once their spouse is not an option, they can find no emotional support from anyone. Health and well-being are well known to be linked to two central life circumstances: socio-economic situation, and family/friend networks. Older women in Canada clearly do not have sufficient incomes to live well. They may make up for

this by their wide social networks. Men, who are better off financially in their older years, are less rich in social contacts and supports. Although the myth of the dependent elder is shattered by these findings, it is clear that policy-makers must take steps to improve the socio-economic circumstances of older women in Canada, circumstances that are the cumulative result of gender inequalities throughout life.

The longer-term future is portended in this analysis as well. Those middle-aged women who are caring for their older, differentially female relatives, may also care for their own spouses later on, leaving less and less time and energy available to care for themselves, to work to build up pension credits, and to care for friends. Women's imbeddedness in family and family committments is not lessening. Older women of the future -- those who are now middle-aged -- may have as difficult a challenge in old age as our mothers and grandmothers have today, contrary to popular belief. This societal caregiving crunch, faced largely by women, is one of the most salient policy challenges Canada faces in the 1990's and beyond.

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